

**Interview with:**

**Larry Van Wagner**

**Marist College**

**Poughkeepsie, NY**

**Transcribed by Lynn South**

**For the Marist College Archives and Special Collections**

## Transcript – Larry Van Wagner

**Interviewee:** Larry Van Wagner

**Interviewer:** Gus Nolan

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Marist College, (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.)

**Summary:** Larry Van Wagner talks about how his childhood interest and skill with swimming which led him to a career dedicated to coaching the sport. Larry also discusses how his early involvement in the swimming program at Marist allowed him to become a major force in shaping how it evolved at Marist.

**Gus Nolan:** Today is Thursday, July the fourteenth. We're having an interview with Larry Van Wagner, who is our swimming director, or...among many other things... I'll leave that for who he is. We're going to have this interview in the Marist College Library and will be put into the oral archives. Well, good afternoon, Larry.

**Larry Van Wagner:** Good afternoon!

**GN:** Larry, there's like three major phases to this interview: before Marist, Marist...for many people, there's an "after Marist," but you're a continuation of Marist, which is another fifteen years after the twenty-year celebration that they give you an award for staying that long [laughs]. So why don't we start before Marist. Could you give us kind of a thumbnail background of where you were born, where you grew up, the schools you went to, and maybe I'll interrupt you along the way. So you were born in?

**LVW:** Born in Poughkeepsie, New York. Right down the road at Vassar Hospital, which is the facility my mom worked at for twenty-five years. Myself, my brother and sister were all born there. We lived in Hyde Park, New York. I attended FDR High School, and 1970 graduated, and went on to Springfield College in Massachusetts.

**GN:** Okay, you went a little fast. Before high school, were you in Hyde Park? Were you living in Hyde Park in your youth?

**LVW:** Yes! From, actually, the age of three. We were in Wappingers the first three years.

**GN:** I see.

**LVW:** But from the age of three and on, my parents still...my mother still resides on Terwilliger Road in Hyde Park as of today, fifty-six years later.

**GN:** And the year of your birth, you don't have to tell me that, but I just want to get a historical picture.

**LVW:** Sure. 1952. [laughs]

**GN:** Fifty-two, ok! Eisenhower became president...

**LVW:** He could have! [laughs] Wasn't sure at the time!

**GN:** [laughs] You weren't there to vote!

**LVW:** No.

**GN:** I think that was my first election. Moving on...which historical memory of those times growing up...we were not in Vietnam yet, it was something to come a little later in your life.

**LVW:** Yes.

**GN:** So, how would you describe those times?

**LVW:** Well, Hyde Park was a tremendous place to live in the fifties, and in the sixties. It was a much smaller community, obviously, than it is today. We could ride our bikes, when we were old enough, we could ride our bikes anywhere in the town. And it was a swimming facility called Amar Swimming Facility where I learned how to swim. In fact, I remember distinctly how it took me three opportunities to get out of the beginner's swimming class. So I don't know if that was a motivating factor for my eventual career choice or not, but I've developed friends with other families in the Hyde Park area, whose children were also involved in the sport of swimming. Obviously, there were not many facilities. There were never a swimming facility in the Hyde Park school district, so that made it even more difficult for us to find venues in which to continue if we wanted to progress in competitive swimming, which I eventually got into full time, when I was around fifteen, sixteen years of age. And then at that time, I believe it was when I was sixteen, in the middle to late sixties, there was a group of families, seventy I believe in total. Of which my family was one of which, and we all got together and sponsored the creation of Hyde Park Swim and Tennis Club. So we were one of the founding, or original

members that built that facility. And that's really where I think my introduction and my commitment to the sport of swimming took off, because at that time I was employed there as a lifeguard, I swam there as a competitive swimmer. I eventually coached there.

**GN:** Was there an indoor facility there as well?

**LW:** No, it was strictly outdoors, so it was a summer season only facility. And I would spend from dawn to dusk; my mom would drop me off at the rising of the sun, and pick me up at the setting of the sun every single day throughout those first few summers. But then as I got to my junior year, and I had really explored my opportunities and all of the team sports that were a part of the school district, like football and wrestling and crew, at the time. And obviously I have some very fond memories of the people I interacted with, and the coaches especially, while I was in the Hyde Park school district. But I finally came to the realization that I didn't have a tremendous amount of potential in those team sports. Swimming was something I was just naturally good at. So in my junior year of high school I decided to do swimming year round, and again, understanding how dry—that was the definition we used to describe the Hudson Valley—it was a very dry county when it comes to competitive swimming pools. And the only indoor one that was really a true competitive facility was the Poughkeepsie YMCA. But not the old YMCA, I'm talking about the new one, which did not open until the late sixties. I mean, I swam in the old one on Market Street, which I believe is a social service facility for Dutchess County. But we started with the opening of the new YMCA eventually, the first year, and that was my senior year, I believe, in high school. At the time, it was a family called the Kennedy family, which was well known in the competitive swimming circles, in the entire northeast region. Because all those kids swam, they had five kids that swam.

**GN:** Were they...was he mayor of the town?

**LVW:** Jack Kennedy eventually became mayor, but that was after I had already left for college. But yes, Jack Kennedy I swam for, and his wife, for the entire twelve month season. And I did that for the last two years of high school, and I can still remember today sitting in the lobby of, at that time, the new Poughkeepsie YMCA, and I asked Mr. Kennedy, “Well, look, I’d like to continue swimming in college, and I think I also want to major in physical education. Where would you suggest I go?” And I can still see myself sitting there, and seeing him tell me: “Well you know, there’s this small private school in Massachusetts that has an outstanding, nationally recognized physical education program, called Springfield College. And the swimming coach there is actually world renowned, his name is Charles Silvia.” That’s where I ended up going. Stayed for an undergraduate and graduate career, I was an assistant coach to coach Silvia in my fifth year at Springfield College, came out with an undergraduate degree in P.E. and a master’s degree in administration. And again, came back to Marist...I’d worked in the IBM, because my dad—that was the other childhood thought, that everybody on my block worked for IBM. All the dads worked for IBM and they all carpooled. So my dad worked for IBM for over thirty years, and because of that relationship, I worked for the IBM country clubs, I worked for a season here in Poughkeepsie, I worked for the last my senior year up in Kingston. And it was after my tour, so to speak, at the Kingston IBM swimming facility that I had my two job offers. I took the one as an aquatic director and swimming coach for the YMCA on the eastern shore of Maryland.

**GN:** Okay. It’s amazing to see someone so focused from the early years of grade school, and high school for sure, and absolutely college, to stay on the same point, you know.

**LVW:** I agree, I think it’s truly unusual today. I don’t think we had as many opportunities back then, or as many distractions back then. So for whatever reason, I knew early in life, probably

before my high school years, that I wanted to do something either in physical education, or athletics, or a combination of both. I also...

**GN:** That probably—Go ahead.

**LVW:** Probably determined that after my student teaching experience at Springfield, it wasn't in the elementary, and it wasn't in the secondary school district. I wanted to be a college coach.

**GN:** Outside of golf, I guess, few people stay on the same course. There's a love for it, you're good at it, so you stay with it. And I think you're kind of...you're saying... Things that I'm putting down here are not pertinent now, because I was going to say did you have any work opportunities or hobbies or so on... It's pretty much water [laughs].

**LVW:** Yes it was, it was all aquatic related, for whatever reason [laughs]. So, you know, small world, and my youngest son becomes a part of the US Navy. [laughs] And here I am, still involved with the water to some extent.

**GN:** Okay, let's come to this thing I'm calling "Coming to Marist." As a Hyde Park youngster, then having seen other colleges like those in New England and Massachusetts and Maryland, what is it that brought you—Marist was not very well-known and we didn't have much of a campus here. So there must have been some spark that brought you back.

**LVW:** Sure. Again, as I told you previously, that my only experience with Marist College was running up and down North Road, during my two years that I rowed for Scott Sanford at Roosevelt High School. That was for conditioning purposes only. And never having step foot on the college, I knew the college was here, but I didn't know anything about the school at that time. And then before I left for my first *real* job, so to speak, down in Maryland... I knew that the college was building an athletic facility called the James McCann Center. And in that facility, there would be a pool. But I don't think I saw the schematics of that facility, I'm not sure exactly

what it would look like. I knew that they would have a position, an aquatic director's position that would eventually evolve into a swimming coach's position. So I sought out Howard Golden, gave him my name and my resume at the time, and he kept me up to date as construction went along. And within nine months, I'm back here.

**GN:** Was...the relationship with Howie must have grown too.

**LVW:** Oh, without a doubt.

**GN:** Just came in the front door. Howie's a nice guy, but he can be pretty rough. [laughs]

**LVW:** [laughs] He's been very nice to me from day one, whether he looked at me through a different lens or not, I mean I looked at him, obviously, as another mentor in my life. And I think I got that understanding from the day we first sat down and talked.

**GN:** Then you applied for the position to Howie, he was the athletic director at the time.

**LVW:** That's correct.

**GN:** Were you interviewed with anyone else? Linus Foy or Tony [Campilii], or anyone else talk to you?

**LVW:** Not that I can remember. Ron [Pietro] probably would have been the other person, because their plan at the time was: once the McCann Center opened, Ron would become the acting athletic director, and Howard would stay on as the director for physical education.

**GN:** I see.

**LVW:** So I'm sure I've met Ron, I just don't remember it at the time. It was just Howard. Because I was basically going out of town at the time. When I came back for the interview, I'm sure that Ron was involved in the process as well.

**GN:** And Howie also had an academic position.

**LVW:** Yes he did.



**GN:** He taught classes and...

**LVW:** Yes he did.

**GN:** His Ph.D., and so that gave him another wing of operation, as it were. The position then... what were you... contracted to do?

**LVW:** Well, when I first came on campus, it was June 1, 1976. The McCann Center was still far from being finished. That was the projected date, but it took another twelve months for them to actually finish the entire facility. Which, again, didn't give me an opportunity to teach, or really, to coach collegiate competitive swimming, but it gave me other opportunities, and that was into administration... with the upcoming expansion of the athletic department, the purchasing of all the equipment that would go into the McCann center, some of the construction...I could change because I had gotten there early enough. There were small things, small details that I could change within the swimming facility to make it more effective before it actually opened. So I, for whatever reason, thought that was a great experience to see it being built basically from the ground up.

**GN:** Yes...and then...just at the beginning there, who put that up...

**LVW:** That was Louis Greenspan. He was the general contractor, and Paul [Canaan] was the architect.

**GN:** Right, Paul [Canaan]. I have some other stories about Paul, he had a little estate...not estate, a home.

**LVW:** Is that right.

**GN:** A friend of mine, Larry Sullivan, lived in there for a while, he [fades out]. Moving on!

Years at Marist. Overall, your position has changed somewhat, would you say?

**LVW:** It has changed, and I'm probably mostly responsible for the changes that have been made. Originally, as an aquatic director, as with Ron, and with Howard, and with Bill Austin my predecessor, we really had three hats that we wore, three areas of responsibility. We were all administrators to some extent, to one extent or another, we were all teachers. We were all physical education majors with teaching certificates, so we all taught as well, and then finally we were all coaches. So we wore all three hats, which was vastly different, obviously, than the individuals who occupy the athletic department here at Marist College. That's all... basically I'm the last of the Mohicans when it comes to those types of responsibilities. I even dropped my own teaching responsibilities with the help of my athletic director at the time, [Gene Doris]. We dropped it from my resume, or my duties and responsibilities, because of everything that was being thrown in.

**GN:** Alright. Then let's just talk about the swimming thing. Describe what's involved there. The teams or how does it happen? Do you recruit?

**LVW:** It took a period of time. I must say, though, when I came here in 1976, and not having a pool in which to recruit for, or a team to recruit for, I did no recruiting for some time, actually. Even though the pool opened in the spring of 1977, it was obviously beyond the deadline for deposits, so there was no recruiting even done at that point in time. There was no need to, because we actually weren't sure when we were going to be open and in operation. So really the first thing that came about with the McCann Center were teaching P.E. classes, beginner swimming and lifeguard training classes that we had. And springboard diving, at times we would have that... eventually we had a scuba program that went on. So we didn't have anything really, the first year the McCann Center was open, in terms of competition swimming; we started a club program, that's usually where you start, to find out what sort of student interest there is. And that

was done in 1978, we were a club program. We really did not become a varsity program until 1979. And at that time, we were co-ed, because the interest of the students was both male and female in origin, so we had a co-ed program, which was truly unusual because all of the conference affiliations we had were with male-oriented sports. So I had a co-ed team that I was coaching, competing against the male teams; and we did that for five years, until 1983. And only in 1983 did we then split the program. We had enough interest from both the men and the women to split the program up into separate teams.

**GN:** The day Marist opened the McCann Center, we can use the expression “the dedication,” there was an exhibit at the pool, and there were diving.

**LVW:** Yes there was. There were divers, our diver’s name was Dave Lang, who I went to Springfield and I was a team member with...And Dave was actually in my wedding, Jenny and my wedding party. So he and Sue Peterson, no I’m sorry, Sue Sylvia was his fiancée at the time, and Sue was the daughter of my college coach Charles Sylvia.

**GN:** Oh, so I see. They were the ones...

**LVW:** Dave was the one giving the exhibition.

**GN:** As things stand now, how does the swimming operation go? Do you go out and recruit students to come, or do students come in the door and say “I’d like to be on the swimming team”?

**LVW:** I always believed that to be an honest recruiter, because I believe there are a lot of coaches that are—in all sports today, that are not truly honest about meeting the needs of the student athletes. I think some of them sometimes perform like used car salesmen than they do honest representatives of the institution. So my personal philosophy has always been to recruit those student athletes that have found Marist college first; what need do they think or believe that

Marist College will meet in their college undergraduate experience. And so those are the individuals that we go out and make contact with. They've made first contact with us, and then we'll continue to dialogue from there, until they get to the point where they have narrowed down their choices of colleges. So today we have a software, a database, because we're dealing now with over one hundred student athletes that are in my database for the 2012 class, freshman class that will come in.

**GN:** Is that so?

**LVW:** [hum of agreement]

**GN:** And...therefore there are cuts. Not everybody makes it who would like to.

**LVW:** Yes, because we have, again...it's interesting, because many people thought at the opening of the McCann Center that Marist had this Olympic-sized facility, and it's not even close, really...pure honesty, it's not even close to being an Olympic-sized facility. The competition part of our swimming facility is just a normal, minimal NCAA limited twenty-five yard, six lane facility, that's what we have. Which most every college, in college swimming, especially in Division One, we're all working in the same minimum facility. The one advantage that Marist has is the diving well; we have a very nice diving well which is a forty foot by forty foot diving well, beyond the swimming competition's area. So that allows our divers to compete, and basically to practice at the same time that we are swimming competitively, which makes it a much closer relationship between our swimming and diving contingents. But because of the facility, to answer your question, we have to limit the size of the roster. So right now I limit it to twenty swimmers. Twenty male, twenty female, forty swimmers total, because that's all we can physically fit into our pool at one time.

**GN:** Sidebar. Do you have anything to do with clubs? Swimming and all that?

**LVW:** Yes. I'm glad you asked me that. That was basically the first program I started, was the Marist Swim Club. It's a USS program, it's an age group program, so we have them coming in as young as five, and we have them staying as old as... I've had twenty-seven and twenty-eight year olds! Still competing, even on a national level with a USS Club; United States Swimming is what USS stands for. So I start at the club, and again, they were part of the opening ceremonies back in 1977 when we opened the doors to the McCann Center. I had the Marist Swim Club; that was the first day that they officially started their relationship with Marist College. So we came in, I conducted a practice during the dedication ceremonies, along with my friend Dave Lang doing the diving at the other end. And that was the start of the USS program here at the college. And I started that with the help of Ron [Pietro], and Doctor Linus Foy.

**GN:** Is it still operative?

**LVW:** Still operating today, thirty-five years later.

**GN:** How big a program is it?

**LVW:** We, again, manage it in terms of size, so we've had approximately seventy-five young men and women from the Hudson Valley.

**GN:** Yeah, I think that was part of the underlying... That we were going to provide an opportunity for the neighborhood youths.

**LVW:** That's correct, that was the understanding we had with the McCann foundation at the time, is that we're going to have the doors open to the community, and in some way service their needs. And again, being from the community... as a former club swimmer, I knew there was a tremendous need to have a professionally directed, but also a college controlled age group swimming program in the Hudson Valley. And that's another reason why we started the Marist Swim Club. And thank God we did.

**GN:** Yes...There's a hundred questions going through my mind about it [laughs]. Do you give scholarships?

**LVW:** We do! We didn't start them until the nineties. So from the late seventies to the early nineties, we were operating with no athletic scholarship money, which is what—in the NCAA's eyes—they would define us as a division three program; even though the college was division one since 1980. The only sport that competed with the scholarship support was basketball. The rest of us had no scholarship support until the nineties.

**GN:** That's...That's one...Another question: How do you go about...or does nature itself, or the enthusiasm of the participants...How do you get the drive to keep coming to practice? The water's all cold sometimes in the morning, or even in the afternoon. But most people, it seems to me, come to swim, they're dedicated to it.

**LVW:** You have to be. You absolutely have to be, because swimming may be unlike many other sports. It's not a team sport, it's considered an individual sport. Much of the motivation has to come from within. When you get in the pool and practice, and you submerge your head, below the surface of the water, there is nobody else there. There's not a team, really, to support you or motivate you or to help you establish your personal goals, and motivate you to achieve those personal goals. That's why I think swimmers, in particular, are the greatest goal setters and achievers that we have in college athletics, because they do it themselves.

**GN:** It reminds me of cross-country running, or something like that. Just to get out there...

**LVW:** Same experience.

**GN:** And do it in the cold of the morning.

**LVW:** And the other thing too is, because our sport is so aerobically demanding, we have to put more time in. Which many of the student athletes at Marist are amazed at how much time the

swimmers put in to their preparation. Our kids...we are basically training, or, they are required to train twenty hours a week. And on top of that, we have, because of the nature of the sport, the longest collegiate season in college athletics; its twenty-four weeks long, that we're going twenty hours of commitment, which is...a pretty large commitment. It'd be no different than having almost a part time or full time job and still be a student.

**GN:** Okay...Do you travel much?

**LVW:** We don't have to travel thankfully, because now that the college decided to go into this—our most recent athletic conference, the MAAC Conference, we did that in 1995. Swimming actually was actually the first sport at Marist to go into the MAAC Conference. We were in it for two years before the rest of the athletic department was allowed to come in, because they still had prior commitments to the northeast conference at the time. So we were the first sport to compete in the MAAC and we did so for two years. But thankfully because of that relationship, we now had a secured and maintained dual meet schedule, as well as a championship meet schedule. Prior to that, we were in a conference called the Metropolitan Swimming and Diving Conference, specifically, I think, only to our sport.

**GN:** Do you have any problems with attendance, or is that the same question that...the motivation of the student to come...he'll come on his own.

**LVW:** You know, we set the demands right off the bat during the recruiting process; every student athlete that is looking at Marist College is told “these are the requirements to be a member of the men's or the women's swimming and diving program.” So they know well ahead of time, coming in that commitment that's going to be demanded of them before they even step foot on the campus. So, no. To answer your question, no, I don't have any problem with attendance [laughs].

**GN:** They know the name of the game!

**LVW:** They do, they do!

**GN:** How many coaches do you have?

**LVW:** Part time. I'm the only full time person on the aquatic staff. So right now we have Melanie [Bolstad], who is a diver and a P.E. major at the University of Maryland. Her husband is Rick [Bolstad], who was an IBM-er, an engineer at IBM, and they relocated to the Hudson Valley. And Rick was a diver at Syracuse University, so they're both former athletes, they're both competing on a rather grand scale in division one athletics and diving. And they relocated to Highland, New York, and found out during their transition that there was a pool at Marist College, so [laughs] they sought out the facility... like "go where the water is!" They sought out Marist College and got involved in our US diving club. And that was over twenty-two years ago. It's ironic that today, their middle son, Brian, just graduated from Marist College as the most successful diver in the history of our program. It recognizes the male athlete of the year, here at Marist College.

**GN:** That's...Its funny, I have to ask you these things because I don't know them off the top of my head.

**LVW:** Of course, of course.

**GN:** And when I go through the list about...Who are the people in athletics and what are their roles, I see some names, and I don't quite fit in...It doesn't, you know...Swimming coach or assistant coach or...There's a woman, or a second woman, there was a Sullivan here, I don't know if she's still with us...

**LVW:** No, she was a former swimmer here at the college, and actually married one of the assistant athletic directors, who became an athletic director at a private division three school in



Rhode Island. So Stephanie was only with us for one year as an assistant coach. But the other person I have to mention besides Melanie is Kyle [O'Neal], Kyle's a local, a resident of Poughkeepsie, attended Poughkeepsie High School, again, swam for the Marist Swim Club...Again, see... We get a lot of things out of the Marist Swim Club, not just for the community, but mostly for Marist College... There are a lot of assets that we've been given in response to the club. Kyle was a member of the Marist Swim Club, he joined us his freshman year in high school; eventually came to Marist College, represented the Red Foxes for four years and became a conference champion during his time here; stayed in the area, volunteer coached the college program for another ten years; and in the last eight years, we've been able to pay him a salary [laughs]. But again, a part-time person in the program, and people like Kyle being here and being involved with us for fifteen years, and Melanie for twenty-two years now, it's...

**GN:** It's unique, you know. I have to hear you say this because I don't know it.

**LVW:** Without a doubt, a major asset to our successes over the years.

**GB:** Let me ask about that, because... Let's talk about your successes... I mean, just to be in the game is sufficient as far as you're concerned. And so, were there some competitions that you were particularly successful in, in terms of... There are all kinds of awards and trophies hanging around the Marist swim pool... What comes to your mind in the category of 'successful wins'?

**LVW:** Well I would say again that our introduction to the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference was a huge step for us, because we were really the forgotten cousins of athletics here, because again, we were in a conference that was totally separated and just hatched from the Marist College athletic conference at the time. So we were competing in a conference that really no one ever heard of or knew anything about, and because of that, probably most of our successes were less appreciated. But because of the fact that we're now competing against the other schools, that

most of our other sports are competing against, and that has an added value, I think. And more so an input to the success of the entire department now. So since becoming a member of the Metropolitan Athletic Conference, our men and women have won twenty four conference championships. Prior to that, they were in the Metropolitan Conference, having won four conference crowns there. And probably the highlight of the conference level championships would be the two EC/AC championships that the women's team has won in the last four years. And I say that because it's more of a regional... you know, we can evaluate our successes only within our conference, the MAAC conference. But now the EC/AC, which, again, is a unique situation, it's a regional conference that encompasses every conference from Maine to Virginia; we're able to see schools that we've never seen before, and compete directly against them. And again to reevaluate *how do we stand* as a MAAC school against the Big Ten...not the Big Tens but the Big East, the Ivy League, the Atlantic Ten schools. And the EC/AC championships has afforded us to do that. So it gives me a greater perspective of our success.

**GN:** Now putting that in focus, when you say twenty four, is that one a year for twenty four years? Or two or three a year?

**LVW:** Well you can win two a year because you have a men's championship and you have a women's championship. And for the first ten years the men won every MAAC conference championship. But in the last fifteen years, they've won twelve total. And the women have won twelve total. It's amazing how they're both equal in their terms of their levels of successes.

They've both won a dozen MAAC conferences in the last fifteen years.

**GN:** To turn the page a little bit...Some disappointments? [pause] You're very optimistic, but I was just thinking...

**LWW:** I think because the only disappointments are—as a coach, and I like to consider myself a professional coach, because that is my background, from my education to my experience...Is that my sole purpose in life, my number one goal is to help every individual try to realize their potential to the fullest. The problem with that is that you also need a student athlete that has the same frame of mind, and you don't always get that on any level of coaching. There are many student athletes along the road as we take this journey through life that, as I could see, had tremendous individual potential within them. And because they didn't have the same dedication and commitment to the sport, we never realized that; and those are *my* failures. I consider them my failures as well.

**GN:** Well... true. I taught English and poetry, and they talk about a tree... And is it obvious to you which way

**Interview Cuts off at This Point**